

The Votary of the Lotus Sutra Will Meet Persecution



THE fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, “Since hatred and jealousy [toward this sutra] abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?”¹ The fifth volume says, “It will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to believe.”² The thirty-eighth volume of the Nirvana Sutra states, “At that time there were countless non-Buddhists. . . . Their hearts gave rise to fury.” It also says, “At that time there were innumerable non-Buddhists who plotted together and went as a group to Ajata-shatru, the king of Magadha, and said: ‘At present there is a man of incomparable wickedness, a monk called Gautama. O King, you have never examined him, and this arouses much fear in us. All sorts of evil people, hoping to gain profit and alms, have flocked to him and become his followers. [These people do not practice goodness, but instead use the power of spells and magic to win over men like] Mahakashyapa, Shari-putra, and Maudgalyayana.’” This well illustrates the meaning of the passage: “Since hatred and jealousy [toward this sutra] abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world. . . .”

The Preceptor Tokuitsu reviled the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai Chih-che, saying, “See here, Chih-i, whose disciple are you? With a tongue less than

three inches long you slander the teachings that come from the Buddha’s long broad tongue that can cover even his face!”³ Tokuitsu also said, “Surely T’ien-t’ai must be perverse and insane.” More than three hundred priests, including the prelates of the seven major temples in Nara such as the Supervisor of Priests Gomyo and the Discipline Master Keishin,⁴ hurled abuse at the Great Teacher Dengyo, saying: “Just as in a land west of China there was a Brahman named Demon Eloquence, so now in this eastern realm of Japan there is a shaved monk who spits out crafty words. Evil spirits invisibly invite such people to deceive and mislead the world.”⁵

However, Dengyo states in his *Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra*: “Shakyamuni taught that the shallow is easy to embrace, but the profound is difficult. To discard the shallow and seek the profound is the way of a person of courage. The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai trusted and obeyed Shakyamuni and worked to uphold the Lotus school, spreading its teachings throughout China. We of Mount Hiei inherited the doctrine from T’ien-t’ai and work to uphold the Lotus school and to disseminate its teachings throughout Japan.”

During the lifetime of the Buddha as well as the two thousand years of the

Former and Middle Days of the Law that followed after his passing, there were only three votaries of the Lotus Sutra. They were the Buddha himself, T'ien-t'ai, and Dengyo. By contrast, Shan-wu-wei and Pu-k'ung of the True Word school, Tu-shun and Chih-yen of the Flower Garland school, and the teachers of the Three Treatises and Dharma Characteristics schools all interpreted the sentences of the sutra of the true teaching so that they accorded with the meaning of the provisional sutras. Scholars such as Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu inwardly grasped the meaning of the Lotus Sutra but did not outwardly speak of it. Not even the four ranks of sages⁶ in the Former Day of the Law could compare with T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo when it came to propagating the Lotus Sutra just as it teaches.

If the Buddha's prediction is true, there must be a votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law, and the great difficulties that he encounters will surpass those that occurred during the Buddha's lifetime. The Buddha himself underwent nine great ordeals. He was slandered by Sundari; he was offered stinking rice gruel; he was forced to eat horse fodder; King Virudhaka massacred the greater part of the Shakya clan; he went begging but his bowl remained empty; the Brahman's daughter Chinchā slandered him; Devadatta dropped a boulder from atop a hill [in an attempt to kill him]; and the cold wind forced him to seek robes for protection.⁷ And in addition, he was denounced by all the non-Buddhists, as I mentioned earlier. If we go by the prediction in the sutra [that hatred and jealousy will be much worse after the Buddha's passing], then T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo did not fulfill the Buddha's prophecy. In view of all this, it must be that a votary of the Lotus Sutra will appear in the world at the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law, just as the Buddha predicted.

In any event, on the seventh day of the twelfth month in the tenth year of Bun'ei (1273), a letter from the former governor of Musashi⁸ reached the province of Sado. The letter, to which he had set his seal, read:

We have heard a rumor that Nichiren, the priest exiled to the province of Sado, is leading his disciples and others in plotting some evil action. His scheme is nothing short of outrageous. From now on, those who follow that priest are to be severely punished. Should there be those who nevertheless still violate this prohibition, their names are to be reported. This is an official order.

Priest Kan'e⁹

The seventh day of the twelfth month in the tenth year of Bun'ei
To Echi no Rokuro Saemon-no-jo¹⁰

This letter reads that I am "plotting some evil action." Non-Buddhists slandered the Buddha, saying that Gautama was an evil man. I, Nichiren, have personally suffered each of the nine great ordeals. Among them, [those of my persecutions that correspond to] Virudhaka massacring the Shakya clan, going begging but being left with an empty bowl, and being forced to seek robes for protection from the cold wind have been great trials far surpassing those that occurred during the Buddha's lifetime.¹¹ These are hardships that T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo never met. Truly you should know that, adding Nichiren to the other three, there is now a fourth votary of the Lotus Sutra who has appeared in the Latter Day of the Law. How glad I am to fulfill the words of prophecy from the sutra: "How much more will this be so after his passing?" How sad I feel that all the people of this country will fall into the Avichi hell! I will not go into detail here, or this letter will become too involved. You should seriously ponder this.

Nichiren

The fourteenth day of the first month in the eleventh year of Bun'ei (1274), cyclical sign *kinoe-inu*

All my disciples and followers should read and listen to this letter. Those who are serious in their resolve should discuss it with one another.

POSTSCRIPT:¹²

Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu were both scholars who produced a thousand works. However, they expounded only the provisional Mahayana teachings. Though they understood the meaning of the Lotus Sutra in their hearts, they did not declare it in words. (An oral transmission exists concerning this.)¹³ T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo went so far as to expound it, but they left unrevealed the object of devotion of the essential teaching, the four bodhisattvas,¹⁴ the sanctuary, and the five characters of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. Their reasons were, first, because the Buddha had not transferred these teachings to any of them, and second, because the time was not ripe and the people's capacity had not yet matured. Now the time has arrived, and the four bodhisatt-

vas will surely make their advent. I, Nichiren, was the first to understand this. It is said that the flight of a blue-bird heralds the appearance of the Queen Mother of the West, and that the singing of a magpie foretells the arrival of a guest.¹⁵ [In the same way, there are omens announcing the advent of the four bodhisattvas.] All those who consider themselves my disciples should know that now is the time for the four bodhisattvas to appear. Therefore, even if it should cost you your lives, you must never discard your faith.

Toki, Saburo Saemon-no-jo, Kawanobe, Acharya Yamato, and the rest of you, gentlemen and priests, should read this letter to one another and listen. In this defiled age, you should always talk together and never cease to pray for your next life.

To Kawanobe and his people
Acharya Yamato and the others¹⁶
all of my disciples and followers
Saburo Saemon-no-jo

Nichiren

Respectfully sent to Toki.



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter on Sado in 1274 to all his priest disciples and lay followers, including Toki Jonin and Saburo Saemon-no-jo (Shijo Kingo). Although the government issued a pardon a month later, the Daishonin was still being treated as a criminal, a fact evident from the orders issued by Hojo Nobutoki, the constable of Sado, quoted toward the end of this letter.

The postscript to this letter contains an early reference to the Three Great

Secret Laws—the object of devotion, the sanctuary, and the invocation or daimoku of the essential teaching. Neither Shakyamuni Buddha nor any of his successors in India, China, and Japan ever revealed them. These three form the core of the Daishonin's Buddhism. Among the extant writings, both originals and copies, this is the first in which the Daishonin mentioned the sanctuary, listing the name of each of the Three Great Secret Laws.

In closing, the Daishonin declares that he is the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law who

inherits the lineage of the votaries, Shakyamuni, T'ien-t'ai, and Dengyo.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.
2. Ibid., chap. 14.
3. Quoted in Dengyo's *Essay on the Protection of the Nation*. Tokuitsu's subsequent remark also appears in the same source. Tokuitsu was a priest of the Dharma Characteristics school in Japan during the early Heian period (794–1185). Tokuitsu criticized the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, or Chih-i (538–597), and his one vehicle doctrine of the Lotus Sutra as provisional and debated this point with Dengyo until the latter's death.
4. Keishin (n.d.) was a priest at Todai-ji temple in the early Heian period. He opposed Dengyo's project of constructing a Mahayana ordination platform.
5. Cited in *A Clarification of the Precepts*.
6. Here refers to Mahayana scholars such as Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu. See four ranks of sages in Glossary.
7. The ninth persecution, that of King Ajatashatru loosing drunken wild elephants on Shakyamuni and his disciples, is omitted here.
8. The former governor of Musashi refers to Hojo Nobutoki, who held the post of the governor of Musashi from 1267 to 1273 and was also the constable of Sado Province.
9. It is not certain whether Kan'e refers to Hojo Nobutoki himself or to someone who functioned as his secretary.
10. Homma Rokuro Saemon, a retainer of Hojo Nobutoki, who was steward of Niiho on Sado Island and deputy constable of the island.
11. "Virudhaka massacring the Shakya clan" probably refers to the Tatsunokuchi Persecution and subsequent Sado Exile. The government attempted not only to behead the Daishonin at that time, but also arrested or punished many of his followers. While in the Buddha's lifetime many people of the Shakya clan were killed by King Virudhaka, Shakyamuni himself was not

threatened with execution by the secular authorities; in this sense, the Daishonin's ordeal surpassed that of the Buddha. Moreover, at the time of the Komatsubara Persecution, the Daishonin suffered a sword cut on his forehead, and his left hand was broken; and two of his followers were killed during the incident. As for the other two ordeals mentioned here, throughout much of his life, but especially while in exile on Sado, the Daishonin was forced to endure hunger, cold, and other privations far worse than those experienced by Shakyamuni Buddha for the sake of the Lotus Sutra.

12. On the original manuscript, probably having run out of space, the Daishonin inserted this postscript at the beginning of the letter, which is where it appears in *The Complete Works of Nichiren Daishonin*. In preparing the translation, we have moved it to the end.

13. This note is in the Japanese text. It probably refers to a passage from *Great Concentration and Insight*, which reads: "Vasubandhu and Nagarjuna clearly perceived the truth in their hearts, but they did not teach it. Instead, they employed the provisional Mahayana teachings, which were suited to the times."

14. Four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. See four bodhisattvas in Glossary.

15. The Queen Mother of the West is a legendary goddess who dwells on a mountain in the western part of China. A similar statement is found in *A Collection of Stories and Poems*. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* states, "If a magpie chatters, it foretells the coming of a guest."

16. Little is known about Kawanobe and Acharya Yamato. Kawanobe, a lay believer, is thought to have been arrested and imprisoned at the time of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution. One opinion identifies Acharya Yamato with Acharya Nissho (1221–1323), one of the Daishonin's six senior disciples.